

Secretary Nicholson tours hurricane ravaged areas



Richard Baltz, (far left), acting director, VA Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System, talks with Secretary of Veterans Affairs R. James Nicholson, (second from right), representatives, and others outside the VA medical center's Biloxi campus, about the challenges faced during and after hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast.

Authorized Absence ends for some VA employees

The initial period of authorized absence for employees affected by Hurricane Katrina ended on Friday, September 30, 2005.

Authorized absence will be granted to employees through October 15, 2005, for those employees who have made contact with VA and made themselves available to work. By October 15, 2005, another decision will be made as to how much, if any, additional leave may be approved.

Absence Without Leave began on Saturday, October 1, 2005 for the following categories of staff:

- Employees who have provided contact information but who fail to respond to additional instructions to report to management officials.

- Employees who remain missing.

Subsequent contact by these employees may reveal appropriate reasons for lack of contact, and leave without pay may be changed to authorized absence retroactively as determined appropriate by local management officials.

Employees who have not made contact, should do so by calling toll free, 1-888-766-2474.

See page two for a list of employees who have not yet contacted VA.

As of today, approximately 76 percent New Orleans VA employees have been temporarily placed at other VA facilities.

Veterans Affairs Secretary R. James Nicholson toured VA facilities hit by the one-two punches from deadly Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

“We have a lot of veterans in this area and our priority is to take care of our veterans,” said Nicholson on his visit to the Beaumont VA Outpatient Clinic. Because of power outages in the area, the clinic was closed for much of last week but is now open for business.

Later at the New Orleans VA Medical Center, Nicholson congratulated the staff for the safe evacuation of the patients, employees and their families after the hurricane. “New Orleans VA Medical Center staff has been an inspiration, working under great pressure with limited supplies,” said Nicholson.

The New Orleans facility suffered extensive damage and remains inoperable.

The last stop on the tour was the Mississippi Gulf Coast where he toured the Biloxi and Gulfport VA campuses. The VA at Gulfport sustained major damage. Wooden buildings were largely destroyed and patient buildings were flooded. “The situation here was tragic in material terms, but heroic in human terms,” Nicholson said. According to VA engineers, the Gulfport facility is beyond what would be economically feasible to repair. The facility had been slated to close under the VA CARES program and its operations moved to the Biloxi campus.

Temporary housing helps VA Gulf Coast employees get back on their feet

Seven travel trailers have been set up on VA Gulf Coast's Biloxi campus to provide some short term relief for employees who have lost their homes. An additional four sites are also available for employees who have RVs.

While employees may only stay three weeks in the travel trailers, this temporary housing provides an opportunity for employees to locate other living opportunities while having their immediate needs met.

As vacancies occur, other eligible employees are offered their turn for assistance. More than 400 VA Gulf Coast employees have lost their homes.

Employees asked to provide information

How did hurricane Katrina affect you? All New Orleans VA Medical Center employees are being asked to complete the Employee Personal Needs Checklist found on the VISN Web site, www.visn16.med.va.gov.

Congratulations on jobs well done

The following letters to staff at the VA medical centers in Houston, Texas and Alexandria, Louisiana are just two samples of the many compliments VISN 16 has received from patients and VA employees. VISN 16 employees have shown a commitment like no other to help their fellow employees and veterans throughout this most challenging time. Your compassion and hard work is appreciated. Thank you.

[To Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center in Houston]

I would like to tell you I am so glad to be here with my husband who is on MICU. We were transferred her from New Orleans VA the day after Katrina Hurricane, but 1st we were sent to Earl K Long in Baton Rouge. They were good, but now here he is opening his eyes and tries to speak. He had surgery in N.O. VAMC. Your staff here has been great. I am blessed to be here in the Fisher House and see him here.

Shannon

Westwego, LA

Dear Ms. Eicke [Nurse Executive, Alexandria VA],

I am a physician and the primary care service line leader for the VA in Pittsburgh and had the distinct pleasure of working at your facility after the Katrina disaster. I worked in the ETU for many shifts including day, evening and overnight. In this capacity, I worked with a large number of nurses who staff that area. I was extremely impressed with these nurse's professionalism, compassion and work ethic. Despite sometimes very difficult circumstances, these nurses maintained a professional attitude, were always at their patient's side and were a consistent and great help to me in delivering care to the veterans who presented. I felt it was important to let you know an "outsiders" view of the quality of nursing staff you lead. They are among the finest with whom I have worked.

Sincerely,

David S. Macpherson, MD, MPH

Vice President Primary Care

VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System

New Orleans VA employees who have not contacted VA

The percentage of New Orleans VA employees who have contacted the VA after Hurricane Katrina is now at 96 percent. The following is a list of employees who have not yet made contact. If you know the whereabouts of any of these New Orleans VA employees, please have them call 1-888-766-2474.

| | | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Be, Harry | Hill, Marion S | Nakamura, Shawn J | Spencer, Sharon L |
| Beltran, German | Horton, Steve A | Nesbitt, Lee T Jr | Sullivan, Julia K |
| Blanco, Elodia | Hunt, John P | Owens, Larry D | Sylvester, Barry S |
| Bowles, Jennifer L | Hunter, George | Payne, Myrtle L | Taylor, Vickie A |
| Briant, Traci A | Jacques, Patricia A | Porter, Carlette M | Terrell, Geneva D |
| Butler, Lucretia M | Johnson, Dennis E | Prince, Gwendolyn C | Thomas, Adam A |
| Castle, Erik P | Joseph, Joyce L | Ricciardi, James E | Thomas, Raju |
| Coleman, Antonia K | Larkin, Michael W | Rigby, Peter L | Thornton, Jean L |
| Coleman, Theone Y | Leverett, Tyler | Rivera, Guillermo F | Tran, Thien Lan T |
| Dixon, Funches O | Luppens, David B | Robertson, Kathleen A | Tuft, Helen A |
| Dixon, Hubert | Mack, Linda M | Sabatier, Sonia M | Walker, Philpatrick D |
| Doyle, Mittie K | Mansion, Avannette D | Sakaue, Kenneth M | Wang, Yi-Zarn |
| Drewes, Wayne T | Mar, Charleen L | Sam, Charles J Jr | Washington, Harold B Sr |
| Epps, Joseph M | Martin, Jerome H | Sanders, Debra | Washington, Lionel |
| Everett, Kenneth L | McEwen, Terri Ann | Sievertsen, Erik E | Weyer, Susan M |
| Ge, Lin-Jun | Melgar, Miguel A | Simoneaux, Celia M | Williams, Arthur L |
| Gray, Irving Jr | Mitchell, Marcia S | Simpson, Estrelita H | Wilson, Scott C |
| Hartmann, Erica L | Mosquera, Luis F | Slater, Julia | Wilson, Venessa M |
| Hellstrom, Wayne John G | Murphy, Ronald T | Smith, Charlene M | Young-Cannon, Danielle A |

Ready to help after Hurricane Rita



Above—A team of VA physicians, nurses, pharmacists, and support personnel at Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center in Houston prepare to head out with two mobile health clinics going to the hurricane-affected areas in Beaumont, Texas. The mobile clinics are equipped to evaluate and treat acute and chronic health problems, refill prescriptions, and administer immunizations.

About After the Storm

The *After the Storm* newsletter is a publication produced by the South Central VA Health Care Network in an effort to supply updated information to those affected by Hurricane Katrina as we continue to recover from this devastating storm.

This newsletter will be published on a recurring basis. For more information about the publication or to provide story ideas or information, call April Smith, writer/editor, VISN 16, at 601-364-7902.

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